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TAGS: [PROG](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: BITTER LEMONS: ELECTION TENSION TURNS FUNERAL
GATHERING INTO SHOUTING MATCH

Classified By: CDA JOSEPH PENNINGTON, REASONS 1.4 B/D.

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During a pre-election regional reporting trip to the northwestern city of Stepanavan, PolOff uncomfortably watched a funeral gathering degenerate into a tense shouting match between friends and family when discussion turned to Armenia's approaching February 19 presidential election. Forgetting for a moment that their 80-year-old father had been buried the day before, family members and close friends angrily accused each other and their preferred presidential candidates of being liars. The shouting match, which ended tensely with people breaking up early to go home, revealed the depth of the divisions and tensions that the presidential race has created within Armenian families, even in the remotest corners of the country. END SUMMARY.

FORMER PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEER PAYS HIS RESPECTS

¶2. (U) On February 13, PolOff traveled to the northwestern city of Stepanavan -- where he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1992-94 -- to gauge the pre-election atmosphere.

With a current population of 18,000, Stepanavan is also a hub city for the surrounding 20 villages that boast a collective population of 17,000. Known for its scenic mountain vistas and status as a former health tourism destination for Soviet citizens, Stepanavan nowadays is an agricultural center and major stop along one of the two principal transportation routes that connect Armenia with Georgia. It is also known to be a quiet, sleepy city where people are usually more preoccupied with their crops and harvests than anything else.

¶3. (C) Upon his evening arrival, he phoned old friends to see if he could pay them an informal visit, and subsequently was informed that their 80-year-old father had just died of a stroke and been buried the day before. Putting aside their grief, which had been compounded by the loss of their 80-year-old mother six months before, they invited PolOff to a small post-funeral commemoration they were holding for family and close friends.

EVENING TURNS UGLY WITH ELECTION TALK

14. (C) The gathering of nine friends and family, all between 50-70 years of age, included the middle-aged daughter and son of the deceased. Also present were the siblings' spouses, a 68-year-old sister of the deceased, and four close friends of the family. The latter included three women who were teachers and a 70-year-old female neighbor on pension. After a half hour of somber embraces and exchange of condolences, the discussion turned to the topic of Armenia's presidential election when PolOff tried to delicately raise the subject.

15. (C) The sparks began to fly at this point, when one of the teachers called the ruling authorities and the presidential campaign of front-runner Serzh Sargsian "liars," pledging her support to ex-president Levon Ter-Petrossian. She told PolOff that people in Stepanavan are "scared" to say who they will vote for. The son of the deceased, a colonel in the Armenian army who has worked at the Stepanavan army base for the last 25 years, became enraged at this comment, and blasted the teacher for supporting a "crook."

16. (C) A Republican Party member, with his wife sitting at his side, the son (colonel) unleashed a vitriolic attack on the LTP era and his supporters, accusing the first president of selling off state assets and shutting down Armenian industry while people "huddled" in their sub-freezing homes. He enumerated various national industrial enterprises LTP had allegedly sold off to party cronies in the nineties, who the colonel then charged had pocketed the profits. Citing a TV report he had just seen on TV, the colonel called it an outright lie that LTP had gone to Moscow to shore up Russian support the day before, which he said was nothing but another "campaign ploy" designed to deceive voters.

17. (C) Requesting PolOff not disclose the information,

YEREVAN 00000140 002 OF 003

another teacher chimed in that she and other teachers were being pressured to vote for Sargsian by the director of the agricultural college where she worked. (NOTE: The same director told PolOff in a meeting the following afternoon that the Minister of Agriculture, a member of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation) Dashnaktsutyun, had given instructions to all Ministry employees, including agricultural college directors, to vote for the Dashnak presidential candidate Vahan Hovannisian. On his tour of the premises, however, PolOff spotted significant political propaganda for Serzh Sargsian scattered throughout the new teachers' quarters that the director proudly showed him. Poloff had taught English at the college fifteen years ago. However, the USDA attache separately learned that Armenia's Chief Veterinary Officer, with the MinAg, had directed his entire organization to campaign and vote for the Republican candidate. END NOTE.)

SERZH DELIVERS STABILITY, LTP ONLY LIES

18. (C) Both teachers, and the retired pensioner, yelled at the army colonel, saying he was being hoodwinked by the authorities, and urged him to "open his eyes." The pensioner said she didn't trust anybody, that all Armenian leaders are crooks and liars who steal from the people, and as a result intended to boycott the vote. She scoffed at the recent 60 percent increase in pensions, which she herself benefited from, and said it was an election ploy. "We usually get increases of only 2000 drams (approx USD 6.65) per year," she said, wondering out loud why they decided to raise it so high immediately before the start of the election season. One of the teachers alleged that her Yerevan-employed husband, an LTP supporter, had come to Stepanavan the day before only to discover that three additional names had been listed at their registered voting address. She said this proved that the authorities intended to falsify the vote.

¶9. (C) The army colonel brushed off the allegations as "campaign provocations," and declared that Sargsian had so much support that he didn't need to stoop to such tactics. He then went on the attack again, saying how his father in the days before his death had lamented to him how his grandsons' Russian-language education had been "stunted" by LTP. Apparently LTP, in his early days of his first administration, had ordered the Education Ministry to give priority to Armenian-language curricula at the expense of Russian curricula. The dying man told his son he had been shocked when his second grandson could not read Russian after graduating from secondary school several years before. (NOTE: Both grandsons are officers in the Armenian army; one is stationed at the Stepanavan base and the other is currently eight months into his service in Nagorno-Karabakh. END NOTE.)

¶10. (C) Both spouses (a woman and a man) of the children of the deceased, one of whom was a registered Republican (the woman), said they were voting for Serzh because only he out of the nine candidates in the field could provide Armenian with stability. The man said LTP had "lied" to Stepanavan before, and had already "had his chance." When asked why Armenians linked economic growth with Serzh Sargsian, who has always held security portfolios, the army colonel proudly boasted that "Serzh gave us the stability" necessary to grow. He also emphasized that wherever Serzh had worked in the government, he had always succeeded in increasing the salaries of his employees.

¶11. (C) The daughter of the deceased looked to be at a loss for words in the heated political discussion. She sheepishly looked at PolOff, then her female friends, and plaintively suggested, "Ladies, why don't we vote for Artur Baghdassarian, he appears to be an honest person." Her brother, the colonel, immediately dismissed the 39-year-old leader of the Orinats Yerkir (Rule of Law) party as a silver-tongued opportunist who could not be trusted with the reigns of the country.

¶12. (C) The teachers then tried to tell PolOff -- below the shouting of the colonel -- that Armenians were being "brainwashed" by public television, which they said was "nothing but a mouthpiece" for the ruling authorities. One said she was sure that the recent fire that had gutted two floors at the Ministry of Justice in Yerevan, including one of the Ministry's archives, was politically motivated to

YEREVAN 00000140 003 OF 003

ensure a cover-up of material on file that was embarrassing to the authorities.

GATHERING BREAKS UP EARLY, LEAVING BITTER TASTE

¶13. (C) After an hour of heated discussion, shouting, and interruptions, the daughter of the deceased suggested they conclude the evening and go home. The teachers continued to fume about the corruption of the authorities even as they were putting on their winter jackets and attire for the cold night outside. The colonel shrugged off everything they had to say, and went outside to heat up his car. The reason for the gathering, to commemorate the death of a loved one, appeared to vanish into the night, leaving friends and family with bitter feelings.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) PolOff was taken aback by two things during the evening. First, that people he had previously known to be politically passive had become visibly politicized by the presidential election. Second, that the increasingly acrimonious presidential race has created equally bitter

divisions in Armenian families, who for the most part normally don't wear politics on their sleeves. But as the evening showed, this is no ordinary presidential election, as people here appear to view it as a decisive turning point for Armenia.

PENNINGTON